

University of Missouri Extension

G2864, Reviewed October 1993

Pre-Bit Hackamore Training

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Hackamores are used to start colts in training. An untrained colt makes many mistakes, and the trainer needs to correct them. A hackamore doesn't injure sensitive tissue in the colt's mouth, yet it provides firm, safe control.

Use of a hackamore is based on the simple principle that the horse learns to respond to pressures on its nose and under its chin.

Parts of a hackamore

Hackamores came from Spanish culture, and the name probably was derived from the Spanish word jaquima (hak-kee-mah). The major parts are:

Bosal (boz-al)

This part around the horse's nose is most commonly made of braided rawhide, but it can be made of leather, horsehair or rope. Diameter of the bosal can vary from pencil size to broom handle size, and the bosal may vary in length and rigidity. A bosal may have a cable or rawhide core, but rawhide is preferred to make it pliable and fit closely to the horse's nose. Parts of the bosal are the nose button and cheek buttons, cheeks or shanks, and the heel knot.

Mecate (meh-kah-teh)

This is a continuous horsehair rope that is wrapped around the cheeks of the bosal in a manner to provide both reins and lead line. Other types of rope are frequently substituted for the mecate but are used in the same manner.

Fiador (fee-ah-door)

A fiador is a rope throat latch that usually consists of a doubled rope that is passed around the neck just behind the ears and is attached to the bosal at the heel knot. It helps keep the bosal at right angles to the face of the horse.

Reins

These are necessary when a mecate is not used. They may be made from various kinds of rope or leather. Most rope reins are braided and made from soft rope to assure a good grip by the rider.

Headstall and browband

These complete the hackamore and usually are made of leather; however, small ropes or cords are also used. The headstall should be adjusted to raise or lower the bosal on the horse's nose. Browbands are added to prevent the headstall from slipping back on the neck.

Fitting and adjusting a hackamore

A hackamore must be properly adjusted to achieve satisfactory results — placed low on the nose, near the soft cartilage. Low placement assures maximum leverage and encourages flexion. The bosal should be short enough to make both nose and chin contact without sliding up the nose. To put more pressure on the nose than on the chin, adjust the bosal to allow a slight lift of the heel knot before the cheeks touch the horse's chin. If more contact on the chin is desired, the cheeks of the bosal should be precisely adjusted to make simultaneous contact with the chin and nose.

Making these adjustments will necessitate selecting a bosal length appropriate for a particular horse's nose. Sometimes finding the exact length needed is difficult. Bosals that are too short cannot be used, but those too long may be shortened by binding the cheeks tighter together with the mecate, the rein attachment, a leather strap or other suitable material. Many horsemen prefer to use bosals made from manila lariat rope. These bosals are inexpensive and can be purchased or made for the horse being ridden.

The severity of the bosal is important. Severe contact can cause the horse to overreact to pressures. It is difficult to show the horse what is desired because it is distracted by pain. Soft contact can result in the horse disregarding completely what the rider is trying to show it.

Hardness and rigidity of the bosal are the prime factors affecting severity. Braided rawhide bosals that are large in diameter and have rigid cores are the most severe. For extreme softness, bosals may be made from soft cotton rope. The severity of bosals may be varied by adding or removing certain cushioning materials from the cheeks and nose button. Many materials are satisfactory for this purpose; the most commonly used is sheepskin.

Weight at the heel knot of the bosal should be sufficient to cause instant release of chin pressure when the rider quits pulling. When the fiador is used, it must be loose enough to allow this release of chin pressure. However, the fiador must be tight enough to prevent the bosal from slipping off the nose and to facilitate the balanced carriage of the bosal.

Begin training with driving and longeing

Prior to being ridden, the horse should receive longe line training with a halter and ground driving with a hackamore. During longe line training the horse should learn verbal commands, especially "whoa."

Introduce the horse to the hackamore by stepping in front of it and teaching it to back as a response to bosal pressure. Follow this with a series of driving lessons with driving lines. This training can begin while it is a yearling.

The horse should learn to stop, back and respond laterally. The yearling can be taught to respond to nose pressure and to use both leads while working in a circle without a rider. The primary objective should be to get a response on loose reins with a minimum of pressure. Never give prolonged steady pulls on the hackamore. Steady pressure ceases to have meaning to the horse. By the time the horse is ready to ride, it should have good respect for the bosal and nose pressures and know how to make some of the simple responses.

Head set and neck flexion must be obtained, and this training should be initiated early. Head set refers to the angle at which a horse carries its head when working. Most horsemen prefer the head to be carried perpendicular to the ground.

Flexion refers to the relaxing of the neck and flexing at the poll in response to bosal pressure. Much of this will be obtained during ground driving; however, the head may be tied back to the saddle or a surcingle if flexion appears to be a problem. Put the horse in a stall or small pen and leave it with pressure on its nose, if the poll is not flexed. Eventually the horse will learn to flex and get behind the nose pressure. This may require several hours and may have to be accomplished over a period of several days.

Those first few rides

The first rides may come any time after the yearling year as the rider chooses. A rider on the horse's back is a new experience and should be treated accordingly. The horse has learned respect for the bosal from ground work; however, during initial rides the excitement may cause the horse to ignore what it has learned.

First rides may be in small enclosures to allow the rider to exert less control until the excited stage is over. This helps to keep the horse from ever knowing that it does not have to respond to bosal pressure. Horsemen refer to this as "having the horse run through the hackamore." Another way to prevent this problem is to halter the young horse and lead it from a gentle horse for the first few rides. The purpose of these rides is to acquaint the horse with the rider on its back. Once this transition period is made, the horse should respond to the bosal from its ground training. If responsive control does not come, more ground work may be necessary.

From the very beginning, the rider should keep his or her hands as loose as possible when applying pull on the bosal. This pull will be more nearly in the direction as that exerted by the driving lines, will help assure good flexion at the poll, and will also help the horse acquire a low head carriage.

During these early rides, the horse should learn to walk, trot, stop and back on a relatively loose rein. Good control should be obtained at the walk and trot before trying to lope. However, loping may be accomplished earlier if the rider had access to a small round pen to help assure control.

Using the hackamore

A hackamore, like a bridle, has a "direct rein" and a "bearing rein." Using both reins, the rider must teach the horse to respond to three different

pressures. One of these is direct pressure on the nose and chin caused by an even pull on both reins. The second is a lateral pressure applied to the nose by the direct rein. And the third pressure is the bearing rein against the neck.

In the early stages of training, these pressures and the responses are taught individually. In more advanced training, they are simultaneously presented to the horse to achieve a combined response.

Direct pressures on the nose and chin should be applied only long enough to get a response. If the horse responds to a pull, the reins should be released. Training for the neck rein will require the use of both the direct and the bearing rein in the early stages. A direct rein is used to show the horse the direction in which to move. This rein is also used to keep the horse's head turned slightly to the inside when working in a circle.

A bearing rein should be paired with a direct rein on each movement by simply laying it against the neck. Eventually, the horse will respond to the bearing rein only, and this is the beginning of a neck rein.

Horses not trained to respond lightly to the bearing rein are never good reining horses. Excessive pressure with this rein actually tightens the rein and produces a pull at the mouth that is opposite of the neck pressure. These horses have a tendency to thrust their noses in the direction of the pull at the mouth rather than the direction of the neck pressure. The horse cannot see in the direction of the neck pressure and is reluctant to rein in that direction. This problem can best be corrected with the hackamore by using the direct rein. Any time the horse does not respond to the bearing rein correctly, the rider should apply direct rein pressure.

Conduct training with a rein in each hand.

Teaching the stop

The horse has learned the verbal command "whoa" while working on the longe line as a yearling. Response to nose pressure and how to back have been learned from ground training. After the horse is accustomed to the rider on its back, use lessons learned on the ground to start teaching a stop. Proceed at a walk at first. Pull on the hackamore and then say "whoa." Eventually the horse will stop before the word "whoa" is voiced as nose pressure is applied. Even if the horse does not know what "whoa" means, it will learn to respond to nose pressure. Riding into corners of square pens can be helpful at this stage.

After lessons in stopping from a walk, proceed to the trot using the same techniques. It should collect, i.e. start getting its hind legs under him, at the first sign of nose pressure. Hold its head straight by applying equal pressure to each rein. Expect the horse to flex at the poll without lifting its nose prior to stopping. If it does not, go back to driving lines or a head tie for more work. Don't rush it or be unduly rough; remember, it not only has to learn what you want, but also how to accomplish it.

The horse must learn to stop collected and to drop its hindquarters. The stop should be square, head straight forward and slightly raised, hindquarters dropped slightly. It should settle and wait for the next command. Horses do not naturally stop this way before training; it must be learned.

Before proceeding to the lope, the rider should be satisfied with the horse's stopping at the walk and trot. Remember, pull on the hackamore no

more than is necessary. Use of hands on the reins is best described as pull and release. Pull only until a response is obtained, then release immediately. If long pulls are needed to get a response, try a few quick jerks or go back to ground driving.

Teaching a good stop at the lope is a slow process and should not be attempted until the horse is well accustomed to the rider and has been ridden a great deal at the lope. Don't expect hard stops at first. Learn to appreciate small responses. Select relatively soft ground for this training. If the horse understands the command "whoa," use it. Apply bosal pressure just prior to saying "whoa;" this should aid the horse in learning. Expect the horse to collect, get its feet under it, and stop, but without dropping its hindquarters low for a hard stop. This will come later with more practice.

Don't overdo training in the beginning. A horse may anticipate a command with too much stopping. If the horse is stopping correctly, it will stop harder and get lower with its hindquarters as it gets older and more seasoned.

Leg pressure and foot position can't be overlooked during this training. Sit deep in the saddle for the stop, but stay erect with the feet moved slightly forward. Some riders also like to apply a leg pressure with the stop. These movements can later become preparatory commands for the horse.

Teaching a horse to back

This training can be started as soon as the horse starts making fair responses to the stop. Many people teach the stop and back at the same time, but remember that if a horse is moving, it can't back until it stops. Therefore, some stopping response should be achieved before trying to back. One common mistake is to be overly concerned about backing before the horse is stopping, and this can result in the horse losing its respect for the bosal nose pressure. Backing responses should be initiated with the first ground work before riding; this may cause the horse to respond immediately to backing with a rider.

Backing is an unnatural gait for the horse and must be learned. Horses do not back very much in the pre-training period, and consequently they must learn how to walk backwards. Give your horse time to learn. Much can be accomplished on the ground prior to riding. If the horse has undue problems with backing, the rider should go back to the ground work to help the horse learn this new movement. If the horse makes a few steps backwards, release the bosal pressure. This is a reward for the horse and tells it it has made the desired response.

As the horse progresses in backing, a few more steps can be required each trial before the bosal is released. Eventually the horse will learn to back as long as bosal pressure is present. Much like the stop, leg pressure can be associated with nose pressure in these learning stages. By pairing nose pressure, leg pressure and foot position, we develop several ways to communicate with the horse. All of these cues can mean about the same thing and help assure that the horse gets a clear message. Leg pressures and foot position may be applied in several ways as long as the rider is consistent as it pairs them with nose pressure. Most riders move their feet slightly forward and apply some pressure with the lower leg.

Many times leg pressure is used as a preparatory command and is applied just prior to the bosal pressure. Riders say that the legs tell the horse to move and the hands tell it which way. Leg pressure without bosal pressure commands the horse to move forward, but if bosal pressure is applied a split second following leg pressure, the horse should back. Leg pressure is a preparatory command to alert the horse.

Backing straight is important, and to achieve this the rider must be precise. Don't rush the horse back until it learns to back well. If rushed past its capabilities, it will try to avoid the pressure by turning sideways. Keep leg pressure uniform and pay particular attention to hand position, making sure that there are no lateral pressures. For the first few trials, the rider can help the horse by spreading the hands extra wide with a rein in each. This assures no neck pressure and all the horse gets is a simple bosal pressure to back.

Teaching leads

Most horse people prefer to start in a round pen or ring not over 40 feet in diameter. In addition to learning leads, the small ring will also help to teach collection. The direct rein is used to keep the horse's head positioned from straight ahead to a few degrees to the inside. Straight forward head position is acceptable; however, if the circle being ridden is small, it is preferred to have the head positioned a few degrees to the inside.

Because the horse should look where it is going, the rider should pay particular attention to not letting the head become positioned away from the inside. This habit can lead to real problems in teaching pivots and rollbacks. Let the horse extend its trot prior to taking the lead. From the extended trot, the horse can easily take the inside lead with the aid of outside leg pressure and inside stirrup weight.

Put weight on the inside stirrup, pull the head slightly to the inside, press with the outside leg and push the horse from the extended trot into the lope. If the horse misses the lead, it should be stopped and the entire procedure started again. If the horse is having particular trouble with the lead, it may be necessary to shorten the circle and exaggerate the head pull and the weight shift. Once the horse is in the correct lead, let it lope for several circles before stopping. This will help the horse become more comfortable in the lead, especially if it is a lead it is having trouble with.

Usually one lead is natural for the horse and the other must be learned. Less work will be required on the natural lead than on the learned lead. In the initial stages, the horse should be worked several trials on the learned lead before coming back to the natural lead. As the horse becomes more accustomed to leads, it begins to trot less distance each time before breaking into the lope. The lead becomes easier to pick up and the horse requires less assistance each trial.

Eventually, the horse will learn to pick up the lead from a stop or to reach for the lead when first pushed into the lope. After several trials the horse may not want to extend the trot before loping because the lead is now easier and it anticipates the ultimate goal and tries to move directly toward it. The direct rein should always be tightened and the bearing rein laid against the neck with each trial. These will later become cues, especially the bearing rein, for the horse to take a particular lead.

Foot position can also be developed for cue for leads if it is paired consistently with each lead. Trainers use many different cues with their feet. These cues mean nothing to the horse when first used. Each must be taught by pairing it with the more direct cue used in training.

When a horse is in a particular lead, it means that one side of its body is actually leading the other. This causes the rider to be canted slightly on the horse with the inside foot being carried ahead of the outside foot. This carriage makes it particularly convenient to cue a horse on the inside around the cinch or foreshoulder with the foot for that particular lead. As soon as the horse picks up the lead, the inside foot of the rider will move slightly ahead of the one outside and consequently a slight cue in this area is easily applied.

After good success in the ring, the horse should be ridden on the outside but still in a circle. The horse will learn to rely more on the cues given it and less on the ring. Practice outside should be accomplished in about the same manner as that in the ring.

After success on the outside with the lead, although still working in a circle, the supreme test will come while working straight away. The horse will probably make some old mistakes when working straight away. Remember that one of the lead cues, the circle, is gone. Keep applying the hand and leg cues that have been paired with each circle trial, and with practice the horse should pick up either lead going straight away.

A horse should be worked on the straight away as soon as it can be put in both leads. Excessive circle work can cause horses to lope with exaggerated diagonal position. These horses are said not to track straight and are usually very rough in this gait. If the horse continues to have problems on the straight away, return to the circle pattern.

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